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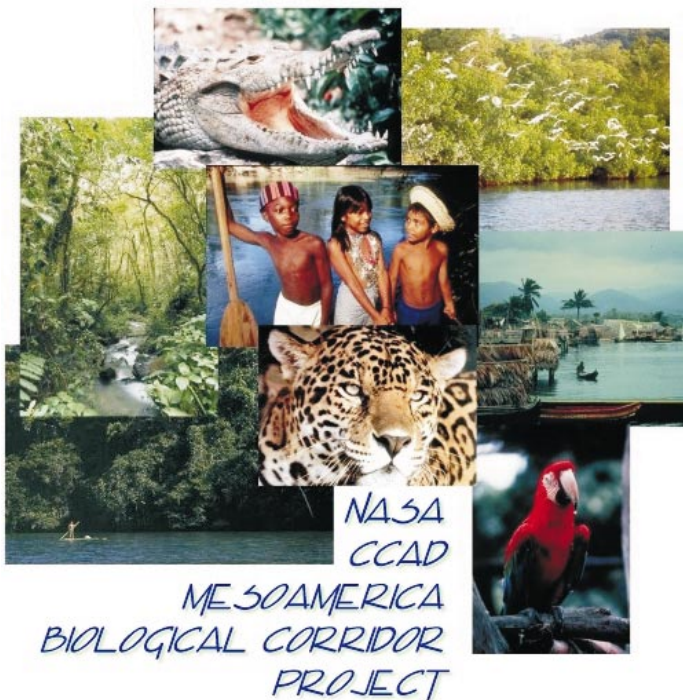
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CENTRAL AMERICAN ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENSE PROGRAM IN THE MESOAMERICAN BIOLOGICAL CORRIDOR

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Mesoamerican Biological Corridor: Ecosystem Conservation and Sustainable Development

One of the greatest conservation efforts ever undertaken on a worldwide level is the Mesoamerican Biological Corridor. Crossing eight national borders this program aims to protect existing ecosystems, while at the same time promoting sustainable development projects that help to alleviate poverty in the region.



Famous for both its biological wealth and its vulnerability to natural disasters, Mesoamerica is comprised of Mexico's five southernmost states and the seven Central American countries, and constitutes one of the most dynamic "biological corridors" in the world. However, the continuous depletion of its natural environment, serious competition for scarce resources, and complex conflicts over harmonious use of nature are major concerns that greatly affect the current and future economic well being of the region. The existing environmental deterioration in the Mesoamerican region is due largely to the poverty affecting over 60 percent of the population combined with destructive conventional production systems that adversely affect many important ecosystems.

Poor natural resource management and the absence of land use planning has resulted in the degradation of natural resources and has set the conditions for many of the natural disasters suffered in the Mesoamerica.

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Since many of the institutions that regulate and control access to these sensitive areas lack the capacities to effectively execute their critical roles, options to provide auxiliary support need to be explored. One such option is to leverage the organizational capacity, communication networks, discipline and rapid response capability of the regional Armed Forces and Police Corps to improve disaster mitigation and even in their prevention.

With this as their focus, the Tropical Agricultural Research and Higher Education Center (CATIE) designed the “Central American Environmental Defense Program for the Mesoamerican Biological Corridor” a training program conceived to contribute to improving and strengthening the capacity of the members of the Armed Forces and Police Corps in technical areas related to environmental, forestry and agricultural roles as well as to disaster management and prevention.

In support of this regional initiative the United States Army War College Center for Strategic Leadership, the United States Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM), the U.S. Department of State, and the Tropical Agriculture Research and Higher Education Center (CATIE) cosponsored a validation workshop for Central American states entitled “*Central American Environmental Defense Program in the Mesoamerican Biological Corridor.*” The workshop was held on the campus of CATIE in Turrialba, Costa Rica, on June 24th through the 27th, 2002. Attendees included Military and civilian officials from Guatemala, Honduras, Belize, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama. This event maintained the momentum established at the USSOUTHCOM, U.S. Department of State, and U.S. Army War College May 2001 *Defense Environmental Cooperation for Central America and the Caribbean Conference* held in San Jose, Costa Rica. At this senior level conference the Ministers of the Environment and Defense agreed to cooperate and involve the military and police forces in addressing the environmental issues that threaten regional security.



A Regional Standard for Environmental Protection

Mandated by their governments to participate in the process of the defense of society and nature’s rights, the regional Armed Forces and Police Corps now receive instruction in the areas of human rights and humanitarian law, and in matters concerning agricultural and environmental management, vulnerability reduction, impact assessment, and disaster mitigation. Further, the regional militaries and police are working hard to improve their historic image and have dedicated themselves to supporting the needs of their civilian populations. Energized by the impact of Hurricane Mitch, the Central American Ministers of Defense and Ministers of Public Security have dedicated forces and planning efforts to better respond to Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Response missions. In another positive action, they have started to work closely and are actively seeking the advice of NGOs who share a common purpose for the region.

In an effort to provide a regional standard, CATIE proposed and developed an educational program aimed at improving and strengthening the capacity of members of the Armed Forces, the Police forces, and the Ministries of Environment in Central America in the technical aspects of environmental defense and protection,

most notably as related to agriculture, forestry, and environmental concerns. The program allows member countries to comply with mandates set forth by the Central American Presidents through the Alliance for Sustainable Development, the Treaty for Democratic Security in Central America, and the Devolvment and Conservation Strategy for the Mesoamerican Biological Corridor. It also acts as the vehicle to improve the national and regional capabilities to deal with vulnerability issues and disaster management aspects that concern the use, conservation, planning, valuation, and sustainable management of natural resources and the environment.

Promoting Regional Security Cooperation

CATIE's proposed program promotes regional security cooperation among the Central American states. It provided the workshop participants with a guide to identify ways that regional environmental defense and protection could move forward on a regional basis.

The proposal has four stages. This validation workshop initiated the first program stage (5 months). It reviewed the design and overall concept and identified the necessary follow on events required to establish the criteria for program participation. Stage Two, conducted at CATIE, teaches 35 Central American officers, five from each country in the region, to be environmental security trainers and to design and validate of the Basic National Programs (2 months). The national and local multiplier effect is demonstrated during the third stage (22 months). The officers trained in Stage Two design and execute courses in their national and local spheres prioritizing those military regions located geographically in the Mesoamerican Biological Corridor. It is estimated that each Trainer will in turn train 40 personnel at the national level, and then use these personnel to assist in developing and teaching courses at the local levels for 200 more personnel. Stage Four addresses the sustainment of the program's expertise within each Central American country (24 months). The program will facilitate the awarding of two Masters Degree-level scholarships per country. The graduates of this program will ensure continuity and permanence of the Central American Defense Program in the Mesoamerican Biological Corridor.

An Outline for Regional Cooperation

The participating Military and civilian officials from Guatemala, Honduras, Belize, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama backed this regional initiative agreeing that effective environmental defense and protection efforts could only move forward on a regional basis. During the working sessions two parallel lines of attack were identified. First, at the strategic concept level, a coordinated effort had to be made to identify potential donors, and to gain additional support from the regional governments, the concerned government ministries, and the Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) and International Organization (IO) communities. Second, there was agreement that each Central American participant must take the initiative to build the military capacity at the national level to execute the program objectives. Actions in this area include integration of the concept of military environmental stewardship throughout force training and in the

curriculums of the nations' Professional Military Education (PME) systems. At the regional level capacity building will be enhanced through joint training and exercises and the sharing of the informational and practical tools required to effectively plan and execute environmental initiatives.

Participants agreed on two Stage One follow-on events. In the third quarter of 2002, a Training Program Development Workshop to coordinate regional military capacity building will be sponsored by Honduras. A Senior Level Military Workshop focused on gaining government ministry support sponsored by El Salvador will be conducted later in the year.

Looking Beyond the Traditional Remedies

Maintaining the Mesoamerican Biological Corridor as a viable avenue of ecological diversity requires looking beyond the traditional remedies. The CATIE proposal reflects a regional approach to preserving this critical environmental region. By incorporating the organizational strengths of the military and police forces into the effort, they provide support to the less capable government agencies responsible for conserving these resources. The willingness to provide the military and police forces with the training and resources to support this effort reflects the enhanced role that security forces now play in supporting the people and democratic institutions in the countries of Central America.

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